Locating Mob Lynching in Select South Asian Fiction

PhD Synopsis

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Violence is endemic to all societies. With global terrorism affecting almost every regions of the world, along with the daily grind of state-sponsored violence, political uprising, ethnic tension, hate-crimes, mob violence, communal conflicts, riots etc., no nation in the world today can claim total immunity from violence. One of the burning issues of the contemporary society is the mob violence and lynching. The term "mob" or "mobile vulgus" is a Latin derivation, which refers to "the movable common people" and was intended to refer to the crowd's irrational behavior.According to English lexicon the term 'lynch' refers to the execution of someone, often by hanging, by horde activity, and without the consent of a legal expert. Therefore, "Lynching is a premeditated extrajudicial killing by a group. It is most often used to characterize informal public executions by a mob so as to punish an alleged transgressor, punish a convicted transgressor, or intimidate" (Wikipedia). Mob lynching began as non-lethal mode of social control, typically involving brutal beatings, maligning, and feathering, but over time it transformed into a much more lethal and devastating means of social control, involving torture, mutilation, hanging, and burning. "The 19th-century lynching mob cuts off ears, toes and fingers, strips off flesh, and distributes portions of the body as souvenirs among the crowd." (Ida B. Wells, 1900). Lynching is a horrendous act and a breach of human rights regardless of whether it is motivated by race, politics, social issues, or religion. The act of lynching dehumanizes people. As every criminal is entitled to due process of the law, it is a terrorist act and is subject to legal punishment. The cases of mob lynching has been increasing at an alarming rate all over the world. However, mob violence and lynching is not a new phenomenon. It has been prevalent across cultures and ages since ancient times. The term "lynch" first emerged as "Lynch Law," a discipline that requires no prerequisites investigations, during the American Revolution. The word 'lynch' or 'lynch law', which means a punishment without trial, has been said to have come from two Virginia-born Americans by the names of Charles and William Lynch. According to Charles Lynch's account from 1782, the "Loyalists" or "Tories," who supported the British government, had access to lynch laws to deal with the Negros. During 19th and 20th centuries in the Western countries, African Americans who were accused of committing a crime were frequently subjected to lynchings as punishment. In many nations around the world, Lynch

law has occasionally been the topic of discussion. However, it has always been viewed as a major enemy of society and has thus occasionally attempted to be controlled by society.

Mob violence and lynching has a long history in India too, often linked to historical injustices such as those related to the caste system. Mob justice has traditionally taken three forms: witch-hunting, historical caste violence against minorities and mob violence during communal conflagrations. India has a long history of mob violence and lynching, which is a clear reflection of a society that still exhibits clear signs of pre-modern values, with the caste system's brutality serving as the most conspicuous example. The long history of violence in India is revealed, disproving the notion that this is a peaceful nation. In recent years, mob lynching has become a kind of hate crime that targets individuals of particular identity or community, members of a minority group, or random strangers under suspicion. Mob lynching is carried out not only to incite fear among the minorities but also used as a political and ideological tool for dominance by the majority group. Numerous innocent people have suffered horrendous torture, and some have even died for no apparent reason. Several cases of lynching happened within the presence of policemen who did nothing and became the mere spectator. It helps the exploiters to take advantage of the situation and score their own goals of revenge or hatred by giving it in the form of mob lynching.

Mob lynching occurs when people become inflamed by hatred and rage and prepare to impose their own rules. “A lynch mob is a destructive and violent gang imbued with, and bonded by, hatred as opposed to a work or social group bonded by creative impulses” (Segal, 1957). Lynch mobs, as psychologists pointed out, arm themselves with a sense of retributive righteousness. They mean to exert social control by exemplary doses of terror on the notion that the violence is the only language that the victims understand. According to a theoretical perspective called “mob psychology,” participation in crowd activity is solely based on the psychological states of the individuals involved. It demonstrates how people act differently in groups than they do on their own. People can assign blame, responsibility, accountability, and/or judgment to the group when they are in a group or a crowd. According to Gustave Le Bon, crowd behavior is highly infectious, which means that if one person becomes thrilled, angry, or aggressive, others will instantly start picking up on these emotions and actions.

Mob lynching can occur for a variety of reasons, including intolerance, casteism, racism, rape, robbery, extortion, anti-nationalist sentiment, religious and class divisions, political motives, and rumours of witchcraft. Hate speeches also provoke mob lynching. Cow slaughter, cattle smuggling, beef consumption, and beef possession are some of the strangest justifications for lynching that exist in India today. It spreads in the form of vigilantism against cow slaughter, taking a communal colour with members of minority community, attacked and lynched based on rumours and false propaganda through social media. The majority of attacks related to lynching involve vigilante violence, including assaults, murder and attempted murder, harassment, assault, gang rape, etc. The victims are frequently fatally injured or severely injured before being hanged, chained, and stripped. The increasing incidence of mob lynching has created an atmosphere of fear among the socially and economically exploited and marginalized sections of people. There are several instances of mob lynching or so called mob justice, where some are politically motivated whereas others are based on fake news, mob panic, and fundamentalist approach of mob. Both the victim as well as near and dear ones undergoes severe physical and mental trauma as a result of the incident of mob lynching. Trauma is a sort of psychological and emotional damage that occurs as a result of a traumatic incident, resulting in serious and long-term psychological consequences. It is a mental condition that arises as a result of an injury. Cathy Caruth, in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, described trauma as a kind of wound inflicted in the realms of the mind. It destabilizes the senses of mind, self, time, and the world of an individual. The rise in the incidents of mob lynching has become the saddest reality of the world which is embedded with the harsh and inhuman reality of the modern society. Mob lynching is not only witnessed in India but also it has been around the world all the time particularly in the countries and cities like Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, South Africa, Israel, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Mexico, Europe and the United States to name a few, concerning racial, caste, communal, and religious issues; the killing, transporting, and consumption of beef; the lifting of children; and rumours that a victim has killed someone or has otherwise been involved.

Though the study of mob lynching is generally relevant to law and social sciences, it has also got its expression in the context of literature too. Conflict and violence forms one of the majors themes in many South Asian fictions. Issues like communal violence, riots, war, political uprising, religious violence, gendered violence, hate crime, rape, murder etc. have been

discussed by many South Asian writers in English. Mob violence and lynching is not a new issue in the South Asian English literature. Ranging from the revolt 1857 to the partition of 1947 partition, significant instances of mob lynching is witnessed in both community and religious riots. It can be traced back from the time of partition of India and Pakistan in the year 1947 up to the present day. During partition, lynchings and other forms of collective violence turned human bodies into targets, with women and children suffering the worst consequences. Chandan Pandey, the author of *Legal Fiction* claimed that Literature do not address the issues of mob lynching at all. But here, I would like to argue that, literature does address the issue of mob lynching but however it gets subsumed in the larger discourse of other collective violence. According to Ziya Us Salam, the author of *Lynch Files: The Forgotten Saga of Victims of Hate Crime*, "Mob lynchings are the new communal riots". The issue of mob violence, riots and lynching are addressed in the works of Amitav Ghosh, Manohar Malgonkar, Bhisham Sahni, Khushant Singh, Arundhati Roy, Megha Majumdar, Chandan Pandey, Quleen Kaur Bijral, Khaled Hosseini to name a few.

Therefore, this study seeks to explore the representation, issue and treatment of mob violence and lynching in the context of selected fictions of South Asia. It will also seek to explore the various complexities associated with the idea of mob lynching in the context of South Asia. In this study an attempt will also be made to study the trauma associated with mob lynching and the psychology of the mob who indulge in the violence. Theory on trauma and mob psychology forwarded by theorists like Cathy Caruth, Erikson, Felman, Sigmund Freud, Gustave Le Bon, Herbert Blumer etc. will be used in the study to support the argument. For the purpose of my research the novels under study are- *The Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh, *Tamas* by Bhisham Sahni, *A Burning* by Megha Majumdar, *Ministry of Utmost Happiness* by Arundhati Roy, *Sea of Poppies* by Amitav Ghosh, *The Witch Some Witch: Damning her and Damning Me* by Quleen O Queen, and *Bend in the Ganges* by Manohar Malgonkar, and *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini.

Review of Literature

My Son's Inheritance: A Secret History of Lynching and Blood Justice in India by Aparna Vaidik offers an examination of lynching and India's pervasive culture of violence. She explores familial history to illustrate how violence is pervasive in the Indian society and how it is woven into our myth, literature, and language. In his 2019 book *Lynch Files: The Forgotten Saga of Victims of Hate Crime,* Ziya Us Salam assembles the tragic tales of those who have suffered at the hands of mob violence and takes a peek inside the minds of the lynchers who break the law with impunity. Various instances of mob lynching in India are shown in the book. The book goes on to discuss the Supreme Court ruling against lynching in more detail and makes an effort to restore trust in the court's ability to stop this violence. The authors Birte Heidemann, Pawan Malreddy and Anindya Sekhar Purakayastha, explore fresh angles on modern South Asian forms of violence in their book *Violence in South Asia: Contemporary Perspective*. It examines how violence permeates society and offers a comparative analysis of its history, culture, and geopolitics in South Asia, drawing on extensive fieldwork and case studies. With essays from Burma, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and Nepal it sheds light on a wide range of subjects, including lynch mobs and mob justice; hate speech, caste and communal violence, gendered violence, and the predicament of the Rohingyas. In her edited book, *Gender and Lynching: the Politics of Memory*, the author investigates the reasons behind the deaths and circumstances that led to the torturing of female Afro-American victims. It focuses on research on how lynching has affected African American women. Nitya Nand Pandey wrote about various mob lynching cases in India as well as the laws governing them in his journal, “Mob Lynching: A New Crime Emerging in Indian Society.” Ishan Gupta’s journal article, “Mob Violence and Vigilantism in India,” describes the rise in mob lynchings in India in recent years, which have primarily targeted Muslims and Dalits. It recognises a number of incidents of mob violence and examines the overall trend seen in such crimes, arguing that a codified law that specifies mob lynching and the associated penalties is necessary. Again, Md Samiul Azim in his article, “Mob Violence in the Novels of Amitav Ghosh” discuss about mob violence viz. riots, lynch mobs and vigilant groups, mob mentality and collective violence with reference to Amitav Ghosh’s novels *The Shadow Lines, Sea of Poppies, The Glass Palace and The Hungry Tide*.

Objectives

i. To study the representation and treatment of mob violence and lynching in the South Asian fiction.
ii. To study the various complexities associated with the idea of conflict, mob violence, and mob lynching in the context of South Asia.
iii. To study the different types of mob lynching and its causes in relation to literature.
iv. To study the trauma and psychology of the mob associated with mob violence and lynching.
v. To study the status of mob lynching in the present society with reference to literature.

Methodology

As a research method, qualitative research method will be employed in the study. The approach of this study will be interdisciplinary. Taking into consideration the rising trends of mob lynching in the contemporary society, the researcher will study the issue of mob lynching from the perspective of literature even though it is studied mainly from the perspectives of law and social sciences. To explain the various incidents leading to and the issue of mob violence and lynching the researcher will study the selected South Asian fictions as primary text along with other relevant non-fictional texts. Trauma theory, theory on mob psychology and other relevant theories pertaining to mob lynching will be studied for better argument. Scholarly text on partition, conflict and violence will also be studied by the researcher for references. Articles, journals, magazines, news papers, essays and true incidents on mob violence and lynching will be studied by the researcher so as to arrive at the most precise findings. Both available primary and secondary resources will be used for the study. The researcher aims to study the incidents of mob lynching during the time of partition upto the present day in the context of South Asia limiting only to India Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan.

Significance of the Study

One of the burning issues of the society in the present scenario is the mob violence and lynching. Ranging from the revolt 1857 to the partition of 1947 partition, significant instances of mob lynching is witnessed in both the community and religious riots. Mob lynching is a very heinous crime. It is slowly becoming a new norm and is disrupting the fabric of our society. It is at present a very serious issue in many places of the world. The study of mob lynching has been done generally from the perspective of law and social science. But from the literary perspective in the context of South Asia such kind of study has not been much done before. Therefore, this study will throw light on the issue of mob lynching in the context of literature with reference to selected fictions of South Asia. It will provide as a base study and pave the way for the future researcher for larger and more diversified work.

Tentative Chapterization

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 2: Understanding the Politics of Mob Lynching

Chapter 3: Representation of Mob Lynching During the Partition

Chapter 4: Trauma vis-a-vis Mob Lynching

Chapter 5: Exploring Mob Psychology during Mob Lynching

Chapter 6: Conclusion

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